

Chapter 25

An Indian Nationalist Condemns the British Empire (1920)

Sarojini Naidu

Introduction

The colonial empires of both Great Britain and France proved to be invaluable resources during World War I (1914-1918), supplying food, raw materials, and soldiers to the war effort. Many Asian and African nationalists believed that their wartime contributions would result in some change of status for their colonialized homeland, but they were sadly mistaken as both European powers realized the strategic roles their overseas empires played. Many more Asians and Africans had seen Europeans killing each other and doing it, according to the propaganda, for the values of Western civilization such as democracy, and individual and national freedom. Not only was the myth of Western invulnerability shattered, but the hypocrisy of the imperial powers was clearly revealed. Thus the interwar years saw a burgeoning of national liberation movements throughout the colonial empires. Some Asian and African leaders stressed nationalism, even citing Woodrow Wilson's (1856-1924) self-determination concept of the Fourteen Points, while others borrowed tactics and ideology from Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924) Bolsheviks, a trend that especially alarmed Western leaders. In this selection, excerpted from a speech by the Indian nationalist and feminist Sarojini Naidu, the rage of the colonialized world is palpable.

Questions to Consider

- What does Naidu accuse the British of?
- How does Naidu use Western values to attack British rule in India?

I speak to you today as standing arraigned because of the blood-guiltiness of those who have committed murder in my country. I need not go into the details. But I am going to speak to you as a woman about the wrongs committed against my sisters. Englishmen, you who pride yourselves upon your chivalry, you who hold more precious than your imperial treasures the honour and chastity of your women, will you sit still and leave unavenged the dishonour, and the insult and agony inflicted upon the veiled women of the Punjab?

The minions of Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, and his martial authorities rent the veil from the faces of the women of the Punjab. Not only were men mown down as if they were grass that is born to wither; but they tore asunder the cherished Purdah,¹ that innermost privacy of the chaste womanhood of India. My sisters were stripped naked, they were flogged, they were outraged. These policies left your British democracy betrayed, dishonored, for no dishonor clings to the martyrs who suffered, but to the tyrants who inflicted the tyranny and pain. Should they hold their Empire by dishonoring the women of another nation or lose it out of chivalry for their honor and chastity? The Bible asked, "What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" You deserve no Empire. You have lost your soul; you have the stain of blood-guiltiness upon you; no nation that rules by tyranny is free; it is the slave of its own despotism.

¹ A practice in which Indian women screen themselves from view through special clothing such as veils and special enclosures in buildings.